


# Lost In Iowa

BY SANDY FLAHIVE PHOTOS BY CLAY SMITH



Lake Geode Park Manager Ulf Konig stands inside a massive sycamore tree at the southeast Iowa park. It ranks among the largest and oldest sycamores in Iowa.





The very rock for which the park was named draws scores of rock hounds from across the state in search of the dazzling quartz gems. While geode collecting is popular in the vicinity, removing them from the state park is not allowed.

# THE BEWITCHING AND BEDAZZLING ROCK OF SOUTHEAST IOWA

**I**N A SPACIOUS, WOODSY, SUN-SOAKED CAMPSITE, ON A SUMMER DAY so perfect that surely it was delivered by the gods themselves, two fishermen from Colona, Ill., are setting up a tent. Greg LeGrand blurts out what amounts to a challenge to Victor Smith, his brother-in-law.

“I’m going to catch one this big!” boasts LeGrand, positioning his hands far apart to indicate a fish of major proportions. “And you, buddy, are going to catch one this big,” he laughs, holding his index fingers a scant few inches apart.

“Nope! Won’t happen that way,” counters Smith, good-naturedly, adding, “One thing’s for sure, though. We’ll catch our fair share of bass. We’ve never been skunked here before.”

And so begins another episode of “The Good Life” for the two, in a stellar recreation area they have been

coming to for many of the past 30 years—Iowa’s outdoor gem: Geode State Park.

## The Tootsie Pop of the geology world...

LeGrand and Smith are only two in a long line of fans of 1,640-acre Geode with its 187-acre lake, 168-site (87 with electricity) campground and well-maintained picnic areas. The enthusiastic manager of this popular park in southeast Iowa is Ulf Konig, who, having been privy to the give-and-take of the bantering brothers-in-law, picks up on Smith’s comment. “I try to make sure no one gets ‘skunked’ here,” he says. “But there is something I tell visitors right off the bat to prevent even the slightest disappointment—that because of rabid geode-hunting through the years the park has been picked bone dry.”



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A photograph of a forest with tall trees and sunlight filtering through the leaves. The trees are mostly deciduous with green foliage. The ground is covered in grass and fallen leaves. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day.

Geode State Park, bordered on the south by the Skunk River, is one of the most scenic and popular picnicking spots in southeast Iowa. The premier attraction of the 1,640-acre park is Lake Geode, an 187-acre lake built in 1950. The lake is known for excellent fishing, while the sunny beach entices swimmers and sunbathers.







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Hiking trails require varying levels of athleticism, or take a leisurely stroll along the main roads through the park, as Jerry and Marie Ziegler and their dachshund Buddy of Danville do every day. A trip completely around the lake is possible on the rugged trails. Above, Greg LeGrand and Victor Smith of Colona, Ill., discuss prospects for a successful week of fishing on 187 acres of angler-friendly lake.

However, the good news is that numerous geodes are on exhibit in the park office. Even a 300-pounder has been split open for display.

Still, this leads to the obvious question: “What is so special about geodes that every last one has been scavenged?”

Simple answer: they are bedazzling and mysterious.

In Latin, geode means “earthlike,” thus the name for the spherical rock with its tough, yellowish-gray, knobby outer shell that resembles a human brain or a head of cauliflower, take your pick.

Endowed with the lofty status as Iowa’s state rock in 1967, a geode, when opened, presents a surprise to the unsuspecting. The cavity reveals a sparkling lining of glowing, often colorful, mineral crystals, most often quartz and calcite, which geologists attribute to the percolation of groundwater in the geologic past.

“Even when people do find geodes in neighboring areas, they can be impossible to open. Most people try whacking them caveman style with a hammer, but that doesn’t always work,” says Konig.

With that, he grabs a long-handled tool plumbers use on castiron pipes and proceeds to demonstrate just what it takes to crack even a mere 3-inch geode: a whole lot of

grunts, a whole lot of arm power, beads of sweat, repeated efforts, and a lick and a prayer.

## If water’s your thing...

Built in 1950, Lake Geode is the kingpin of the park.

“Because it’s a no-wake lake, it appeals to paddlers,” explains Konig. “Mostly, though, it’s known for excellent fishing.”

The lake’s main feeder is Cedar Creek, a picturesque waterway lined with 100-foot-high limestone bluffs from which massive boulders have plummeted through the years. “The rocky creekbed fools people into thinking they might buck the odds and find a geode,” says Konig, “but that’s not likely to happen.”

For those who want to stick closer to shore, the sunny beach along the east side of the lake is a welcoming spot for unsupervised swimming and for sunbathing. Nearby, new playground equipment and a new beach house round out the perfect summertime setting.

Although the Skunk River forms a portion of the south boundary of Geode, there is no access from the park.

Sure, the fishing is great for bass, bluegill, red-eared sunfish and catfish. You bet the beach is a grand sandy bed on which to soak your sun-starved body. Absolutely





Several boat ramps are available on the east shore of Lake Geode. The terrain is extraordinarily diverse, with hills, slopes, ravines, streams and dry creekbeds making for an interesting landscape study. At right, Konig uses a plumbing tool to crack open a hard-shelled geode.



nothing beats Lake Geode for a refreshing swim. But you want to get your heart pumping on land? No problem.

“Our trails are challenging,” admits Konig of the well-marked, easily accessible tracks that follow hill and dale completely around the lake. “Boy Scouts come here to test their hiking skills, and mountain bikers love flying up and down the steep paths.” Note that he said “mountain bikers.” This rough-and-tumble terrain is no place for a street bike.

Anyone lucky enough to shoot off to more-rugged areas of the park with Konig as a guide gets an even greater idea of the diversity of Geode’s landscape. The best advice for a fellow wayfarer on one of these sojourns is **1.** hush up, **2.** prepare for a whole lot of hill-climbing, slope-sliding and stream-leaping, **3.** enjoy the park manager’s tale.

“We have the usual fowl and wildlife. Canada geese, herons and ducks on the wetlands. Buckeye butterflies, birds, owls and eagles in the air. Deer, turkeys, bobcats, coyotes and rattlesnakes in the timber.”

Whoa! Rattlesnakes?

“Just a few timber rattlers. They’re not too bright, though. They tend to sunbathe on the road and get run over.”

On trees and vegetation?

“Our upland areas are mostly oak and hickory with

some buckeye and hazelnut. We have patches of restored prairie and wildflowers. Over there is a clump of thistles that the goldfinch love, and...watch it...that’s poison ivy. See what’s clinging to this steep slope? Prickly-pear cactus, a bit of a rarity around here.”

By this time Konig’s sidekick is ready for a little rest, but in vain.

“Let’s scoot down below the dam into the floodplain forest. We’ll get wet crossing the stream, but it’s worth it. Look at that massive tree with the huge cavity going halfway up the trunk. Some say it’s the biggest and oldest sycamore in Iowa.”

Suddenly he stops in his tracks and cocks his head to listen to what a novice considers jibber-jabber.

“Hear that birdcall that sounds like ‘Here I am. Where are you?’ That’s a red-eyed vireo. It actually has dark red eyes.”

And other birds in the park?

“We get neo-tropical species in the spring, like the bright red summer tanager. Otherwise, warblers, broad-winged hawks, whippoorwills, yellow-billed cuckoo and even barn owls.”

Then, proving not everything in the park requires exertion, along come Jerry and Marie Ziegler, from Danville,



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## Geode State Park

Reservations for shelters and half the campsites:

[www.reserveiaparks.com](http://www.reserveiaparks.com) or 877-427-2757

Balance of campsites on a first-come basis.

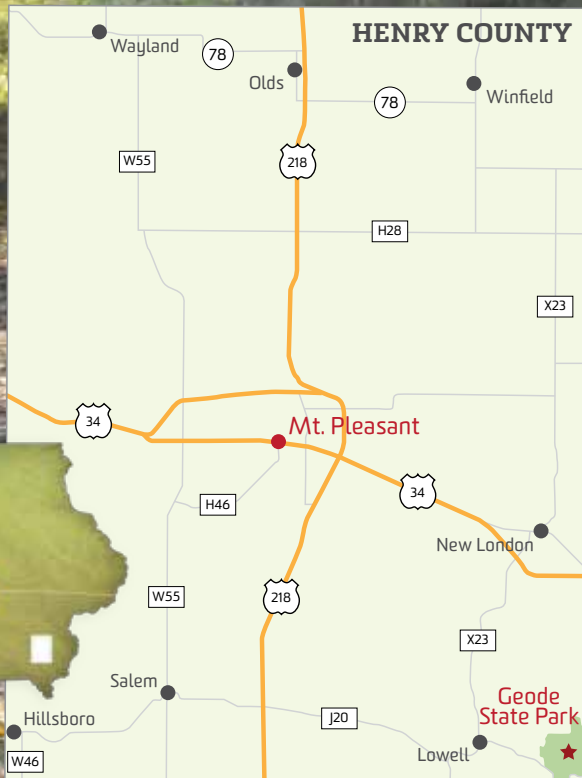
## Oakland Mills Park and Nature Center

Reservations and information for guided canoe trips, cabins and campsites:


[www.henrycountyconservation.com](http://www.henrycountyconservation.com) or 319-986-5067

## Area Attractions

- Lewelling House and Quaker Museum in Salem was a former Underground Railroad stop. 319-385-2460
- Wagon bridge-turned-pedestrian bridge across the Skunk River near Oakland Mills  
On National Register of Historic Places
- Southeast Iowa Bike Route connects Geode State Park to Lacey-Keosauqua State Park along 46 miles of paved, scenic county roads (J40, W55, J20 and X23) with wide shoulders and little traffic.







Geode State Park has several trails to challenge hikers, bikers and cross-country skiers. Geode also sits on the Southeast Iowa Bike Route, a 46-mile trail that connects Geode with Lacey Keosauqua State Park in Van Buren County.



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A must-visit while in the area is the 104-acre Oakland Mills Park, managed by Henry County Conservation. Campsites, rental cabins, trails, guided canoe trips and a spectacular nature center with creative exhibits make a stay in this park memorable.

strolling at a leisurely pace with Buddy, their long-haired dachshund. “We keep him moving, even if at a snail’s pace, two miles a day, five days a week,” chuckles Jerry. “Otherwise that long belly gets fat and starts dragging,” adds Marie.

## Henry County’s Other Jewels

Some say you can’t top Geode State Park, and who’s to argue? It does have an equal, however, and the match makes Henry County a highly desirable destination for a close-up view of nature’s treasures.

Passionate and dedicated describes Henry County Conservation Executive Director John Pullis. Oakland Mills, the 104-acre park he oversees five miles south of Mount Pleasant on the banks of the Skunk River, is nothing less than eye-popping.

“In addition to what we believe is one of the finest nature centers anywhere, we have excellent campsites, cabins, trails and guided canoe trips,” states Pullis, with deserved pride.

Oakland Park Nature Center is, indeed, like no other, with funding and hands-on support from engaged volunteers, plus elbow grease and the uncanny ingenuity of Tony Millard, operations supervisor, and Pullis (“We can’t let ourselves get bored so we jot down wild ideas on napkins

at lunch”). Complex exhibits including window beehives and illuminated sky posters, all fastidiously displayed and authentic to the region’s weather, history, plant, animal and water worlds, entertain a visitor for hours. A live-animal area outdoors includes a male bobcat and two each of permanently disabled screech owls and red-tailed hawks.

As a community resource, the center’s offerings are inexhaustible. “We conduct year-round environmental education programs for adults and children,” says Cari Griffin, the gregarious staff naturalist. “Everything from wolf programs to creek stomping.”

For a real thrill, jump on your bike and race across the 265-foot-long swinging bridge, another napkin inspiration of Pullis and Millard involving cables, sheet metal flooring, yokes and posts. If you aren’t into such antics, gentle trails wind through much of the timbered park.

When it’s time to rest, three cozy camping areas in the park with both electric and primitive sites, and two cabins, await. About the cabins? They are the best! Immaculate (thanks to the rub-and-scrub of staff member Marcie Givens), charming, accommodating. What’s not to love about their two bedrooms (one has bunk beds), double futon in the living room, spacious loft, great kitchenette, heat, air-conditioning and a large





A 265-foot swinging bridge constructed of cables, sheet metal flooring, yokes and posts is a popular feature at Oakland Mills. In addition to the nature center, Oakland Mills has an impressive live animal display and bird viewing areas. A male bobcat is the permanent feline resident. Also calling Oakland Mills Park home are two wing-injured eastern screech owls and two red-tailed hawks.

covered porch from which to look down upon the Skunk River and enjoy your early morning joe.

### No Getting Skunked on the Skunk Either...

On a day dawning with a classic sunrise—rays of fiery fingers tickling into oblivion the misty vapors floating like soft muslin above the placid waters of the Skunk—one has to question the moniker. Skunk? Whether named for the cabbage that sometimes grows on its banks or the ornery critter itself, the waterway is not smelly. It is positively scenic, a good paddling river and an angler's paradise, especially for catfish.

If you're up for a picturesque southeast Iowa paddle, Oakland Mills Park is a good place to put in, with an alternative put-in a bit downstream at the Faulkner access. Pullis and crew offer two-, four- and six-hour guided canoe trips with either four or six canoes.

Nate Hoogeveen, director of DNR river programs, considers the 15-mile run from Oakland Mills to Lowell a pleasant paddling experience. "The Skunk is a scenic, mid-sized, slow river along this stretch and suits many paddlers for a long day on the water," he says. "The banks are frequently lined by low limestone outcroppings with

dense stands of mixed hardwoods along the ridgelines. It tends to have reliable flows into autumn."

Along the zigzagging route, a small rapids and occasional riffles curving around rock bars keep paddlers on their toes, figuratively, of course. Glimpses of cabins in the woods and wary wildlife beyond the banks provoke the dreamer's imagination.

The takeout point of the excursion is the quiet village of Lowell, apparently not always so quaint and serene. Local chatter suggests that in days of yore it was an end-of-the-line, raucous little spot where blustery captains of riverboats traveling up the Skunk spent many a night of revelry before heading back toward the Mississippi.

Back at Lake Geode, the brothers-in-law are solemnly de-camping. It's time to head back to Colona. Just to make sure there is no misunderstanding, LeGrand insists, "Aw, we never really care who catches what or how big they are."

Oh, sure! But one can't help but be curious. So, what are the results at the end of three days?

"Altogether we caught 64 bass and five bluegill...and released them all, as we always do," he reports.

O.K., but who caught the biggest fish?

"He did," laughs Smith, "just as he predicted." 🐸